HOPE—OR HUMBUG?
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Psalm 122
Matthew 24:36, 42–44
Isaiah 2:1–5

"They shall beat their swords into plowshares, . . .
spears into pruning hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more."
Isaiah 2:4 (NRSV)

I do not think we are in a very good situation historically.
I do not believe our relationship to the earth is liable to change for the better
until it gets catastrophically worse. Our record indicates that
we can walk with our eyes wide open straight into sheer destructiveness
if there is a profit on the way. . . . I have no great expectations that
human cussedness will somehow be quickly modified
and turned into generosity or that humanity's care
of the earth will improve much.

But I do go around planting trees on the campus.

Joseph Sittler
Grace Notes and Other Fragments

Bah! Humbug! One of the classic figures in English literature said it, Ebenezer Scrooge, in Charles Dickens' *A Christmas Carol*.

Here is Dickens' wonderful description:

> Oh! But he was a tight-fisted hand at the grind stone, Scrooge! A squeezing, wrenching, grasping, scraping, clutching, covetous old sinner! Hard and sharp as flint from which no steel had ever struck out generous fire; secret, and self-contained, and solitary as an oyster. The cold within him froze his old features, nipped his pointed nose, shriveled his cheek, stiffened his gait: made his eyes red, his thin lips blue and spoke shrewdly in his grating voice.

On Christmas Eve Scrooge sits at his desk in his country house office. Bob Cratchit, his underpaid clerk, sits shivering in the next room. Scrooge's nephew comes to the office. "A merry Christmas, Uncle! God save you."

"Bah!" said Scrooge. "Humbug! . . . Merry Christmas! What's Christmastime to you but a time for paying bills without money; a time for finding yourself a year older, but not an hour richer; a time for balancing your books." "If I could work my will," Scrooge says to his startled nephew, "every idiot who goes about with 'Merry Christmas' on his lips should be boiled with his own pudding, and buried with a stake of holly through his heart. He should!"

We googled "Bah, Humbug" and discovered a site "Arguing against Christmas and Why We Need More 'Bah Humbug.'" The site defines "humbug" as "intending to deceive, a fraud, deception," and then proceeds to launch an all-out attack on Christmas humbug, Christmas traditions, Christmas commercialization, the humbug of Christmas commercials and advertisements and Christmas TV specials, Christmas catalogues, Christmas waste.

There was and is more humbug than usual this year, an extra week of it, in fact. Our retail neighbors started ramping up before Halloween. The official kickoff of the season on Michigan Avenue happened almost in the middle of November with the festival of lights and Mickey and Minnie Mouse and Santa Claus in a parade. Dutifully, we brought out our electric sheep and set them to grazing along the sidewalk on November 17, two full weeks before Advent, which we keep arguing is the beginning of the season. Finally, it is here this morning: the time for expectant waiting, and somehow this year it feels to me as if we are already late.

Ted Wardlaw, President of Austin Theological Seminary, wrote recently that "Advent is a particularly dicey time—when our purposefully minor key music is in danger of being drowned out by the raucous background music of popular culture." By the time it gets here "we are already engorged with a whole year's worth of Christmas elevator music, window decorations, bell-ringing Salvation Army Santa Clauses, daily arrivals in the mail of yet more slick four-colour catalogues. . . . Rarely is the church more countercultural than during Advent" (*Journal for Preachers*, p. 3).

In his new book, *The Scandalous Gospel of Jesus*, Peter Gomes admits that Advent is his least favorite season and the reason is that while the major theme of Advent is hope, there is a lot about the world in which we live that is devoid of hope, and Christmas, Gomes suggests, makes it worse by covering over the reality with all the forced merriment and partying and eating and drinking. "What I find difficult to take seriously about Advent is the note of false rather than authentic hope that is imposed upon people,"

he writes. “I know more of humbug than hope. Humbug I know. Humbug I see. The world is full of humbug.” Peter may be a little more Scrooge-like than we are comfortable with. But his point is an important one. Authentic hope is not a superficial optimism that sees the world through rose-tinted spectacles. Authentic hope takes the reality of the world seriously. Advent hope is Joseph Sittler, a consummate realist about the human condition and human sinfulness, planting trees on the University of Chicago campus until the day he died.

Authentic hope, the hope of Advent, is not shallow but deep. The hope of Advent is relentless and always hidden within the reality of the world and the lives we are living. The hope of Advent is based simply on nothing less than the reality of God.

Where is it then? Where is this Advent hope that is not humbug?

The answer comes from deep in history: centuries before the birth of Jesus, a prophet wrote that the day is coming when people will stream to the mountain of God; the nations will come and the most remarkable thing will happen:

> They shall beat their swords into plowshares,
> and their spears into pruning hooks;
> nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
> neither shall they learn war any more.

The interesting thing about that vision of nations living in peace is that it was a difficult and violent time for Israel, caught in the middle of a power struggle between great nations. The prophet sees a vision of something coming that isn’t here yet, an alternative vision of creation healed, mended, reconciled.

Dave Davis, pastor of the Nassau Presbyterian Church in Princeton, in a fine reflection on Isaiah’s vision, says, “I guess we’re not there yet.” And then Dave, good pastor that he is, tells about having lunch with a very distinguished citizen of Princeton, an eighty-five-year-old man, not a church member, but a man who knew and loved Princeton, New Jersey, where he lived all his life. It was a very pleasant lunch, Dave said, until the end, when the man asked, “So what do you Christians say to people who worry about the state of the world? . . . Thousands of years and we’re still fighting each other and killing each other. It makes no sense—all the death and destruction. It’s not getting any better. How can there be a God?”

Dave says that, like all of us, the gentleman was “looking for a little comfort reading the daily newspaper, a little hope for his grandchildren. He was,” Dave says, “asking about Advent.”

Almost drowned out by the noise of the celebration that has already begun, the precious message of Advent, the precious countercultural, counterintuitive good news is that, in spite of what is going on in the world, a day of peace is coming, a day when the economy of war becomes an economy of peace: a day when the money spent on weapons is redirected to produce agricultural implements, when billions invested in bombs and airplanes and weapons systems are used for life—for education and schools, hospitals and health care. The countercultural message of Advent is that in spite of what is happening at the moment, a day of justice and kindness and mercy is coming. So softly and quietly that you have to strain to hear it, the message of Advent is that there is a God and that all, finally and ultimately, will be well.

Why hasn't it happened yet? When is it going to happen? How will we know when it happens? Perhaps it is because I am an optimist but something did happen this week. Palestinians and Israelis came to Annapolis last Tuesday at the invitation of the president, and so did the Saudi Arabians and Syrians, and while it was very modest—simply a commitment to keep talking—and while passionate partisans on both sides have already concluded that this cannot and will not work, something happened, something deeply hopeful.

Besides, we don't know when or where. No one does. Not even the angels know, Jesus said. Jesus said he didn't know; only God knows. "Keep awake," he said, "for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming." Apocalypticism—the end of things: we don't talk about it much in the Presbyterian church, and part of the reason is that the people who do talk about it—the pre-millenialists, millenialists, post-millenialists, the Jerry Jenkins and Tim LaHayes, authors of the *Left Behind* series of books—have made a cottage industry out of predicting the end of the world, studying arcane formulas, interpreting esoteric symbols, selling millions of books describing the final days and the rapture in bloody and violent terms, and in the process totally distorting the gospel. But it is an enormous commercial success and people love it, and part of the reason we don't talk much about it is that we don't want anything to do with the fear mongering, the distortion of the Good News of God's love.

But part of the reason we don't talk much about it, the most important part actually, is that passage near the end of the Gospel according to Matthew when Jesus says, in response to a question about when is God going to finally come and bring all things to completion, "I don't know. The angels don't know. Only God knows. . . . So keep alert, awake." "Live, now," that is to say, "in hope; live expectantly, lean into the future knowing that God is coming."

One of my favorite Christmas books is an old one, *A Sprig of Holly*, a collection of essays by Halford Luccock, who wrote for the *Christian Century* a generation ago. And one of my favorite essays, which I read every year is "Living on Tiptoe": "Nothing really great ever happened without a great many lives being lived in expectation. Those are the kind of folk by which the world moves forward, always standing on tiptoe" (pp. 46–48).

To live hopefully is to work hard; to hope relentlessly is to throw yourself into the struggle for the realization of hope. To hope for justice and peace is to work for it. To hope for a time when the poor are cared for and children honored and nurtured is not to sit around complaining about how bad things are; it is to find some hungry people to feed and some children to nurture. Peace in the Middle East will require hard and sustained work on the part of everyone—the Palestinian people, Israel, the United States, our president. Everyone will have to sacrifice and compromise. Hopeful people are not passive, waiting for God to come and make everything right, but in the meantime, until that day, working as hard as they can. "Jesus is coming. Look busy." the bumper sticker says and it is right in its theology of hopefulness.

Occasionally people ask if all the outreach ministries of this church are worth it. They say something like, "It's very nice that you spend so much of your energy and resources feeding the hungry, tutoring, welcoming the homeless and marginalized, but it really doesn't make any difference, does it? Nothing ever changes." I usually mumble something about our mission being the reason for our being here, but I am going to try to remember something Calvin Butts, pastor of the Abyssinian Baptist Church in Harlem said when he was asked a similar question. Located north of 125th Street in New York City, in the midst of social decay and dysfunction, burned out buildings, pawn shops, boarded up storefronts and grocery stores, prostitutes and crack dealers plying their trades, the Abyssinian Baptist Church decided to stay put and to reach out—living expectantly, on tiptoe, watching, keeping alert. So they organized a bank and latchkey program and a redevelopment agency, and they conducted boycotts against overpriced supermarkets. A reporter from the *New York Times* interviewed Calvin Butts once. "You're doing some good things here. But it's hard to see what difference any of it is making. What keeps you folks going?" Calvin's answer was a classic and I wish I had said it. "We've read the Bible," he said, "and we know how it ends. We aren't at the end yet" (see *Journal for Preachers*, Ted Wardlaw, p. 4).

We know how it ends. It ends with God, and God's creation complete, healed, fulfilled, reconciled at last, and all of God's people, all people, living together in justice and kindness and peace. Humbug—or hope?

The relentless hope of Advent began in one of the darkest moments in Israel's history, and it lives in the midst of the darkness in every age.

The relentless hope of Advent will not be silenced or defeated. The light of Christmas will not be extinguished, even by the deepest darkness.

The relentless hope of Advent comes to you and me in very human and very real darkness:

- darkness when the doctor comes in and says that the test results are not good
- darkness when a dear one dies and a light that shined in your life for years goes out
- darkness when the company downsizes and the job that was your security and your identity is no more
- darkness when the relationship you lived for and depended on becomes frayed and fragile
- darkness when friends you counted on turn against you, let you down
- darkness of loneliness when you aren't sure another soul in the world cares about you
- darkness—the dark night of the soul when everyone of us knows deeply and profoundly our own mortality

In a journal devoted to art and faith, author Doris Betts was one of the artists invited to write a piece, "Why Believe in God?" She cited the popularity of all the new books on atheism and why it makes no sense to believe in God. And then she told a story.

Her husband has Parkinson's disease. His first symptom was a slight hand tremor, his facial expression changed, he lost mobility. His disease progressed until neither equipment or pills could subdue growing brain damage. He was in the unlucky 30 percent of Parkinson's patients who suffer a gradual erosion of personality and selfhood.

"Where has he gone," she asked, "my husband of fifty-five years, this father and grandfather, lawyer and judge, this lover and logician, reader and chess player, the durable companion who meant to retire and go world-traveling with me?"

From deep in her soul, Doris Betts says, "If there's no God, there ought to be. I keep deciding to believe in God, even on bad days. In this, my seventh decade, faith seems to me not certainty, but a commitment, a renewable vow" (*Image*, no. 55, pp. 63–66).

Hope—or humbug? I'll put my money on hope, because 2,000 years ago, a child was born whose name was Emmanuel. God with us.

Israel’s strength and consolation,
Hope of all the earth thou art;
Dear desire of every nation,
Joy of every longing heart.

Amen.